



*Hyde School
and the
Runaway:
A Position
Paper*

HYDE SCHOOL AND THE RUNAWAY: A POSITION PAPER

QUITTING DEFINED

HISTORY

WHO RUNS? WHEN AND WHY

HOW TO RESPOND

THE LEGITIMACY OF OUR POSITION

Hyde is many things but it is first and foremost a challenge. Plain and simple, this is a hard school. Many on the faculty are alumni and can vouch for this from both sides of the desk. Much has changed in our 25 years as a school but the idea of Hyde as a challenging place has remained. Some students occasionally want to quit. That is normal. Taking the step from wanting to quit to acting upon it is a serious matter. It is also a family matter.

There are two ways to quit. One is to pack up one's belongings and depart the campus - i.e. run away. The other is to refuse to comply with the demands of the program. Both ways add up to the same conclusion: the student has decided to quit on the commitment that was made at the interview. It is important to recognize that neither action is a rebellion against Hyde School. Both are direct rebellions against you, the parents. In both cases the student is appealing to the parents for permission to quit. Simply put, your child is calling your "hand".

There are some basic rules of thumb for parents facing the predicament of a son or daughter attempting to quit:

- 1) Shift the burden to your child. As long as you are more worried about the situation than your child, you are not headed toward a constructive resolution.
- 2) **Let Go.** Your inclination will be to get very involved in an attempt to manipulate the outcome. Become less involved and force your child to struggle with the

outcome. Rather than make your child accountable to you, make him/her accountable to life.

3) Get help. Talk with other Hyde parents.

We have observed runaways for almost 20 years. In the early days we felt our way along in the dark searching for the proper way to respond to these students. We did so through a process of trial- and-error as we have done with so many aspects of our curriculum since the school's inception. We discarded some measures which did not work well and we adopted others which have proven highly successful. While there is no single technique or remedy that will be effective with all kids, experience has taught us what **not** to do as well as what works well. Above all, however, avoid putting stock in any particular method or strategy. Instead, put stock in the concept of letting go.

Experience has demonstrated that the student who runs away is of greatest concern to parents. The student who refuses to comply with the program probably causes more headaches for the faculty than the runaway does, but the latter creates more trauma for the parent. What follows is an analysis of our experiences with the runaway.

HISTORY

I was a student at Hyde in the late 60s and early 70s. During that four-year span there was only one student who ran away. His three day adventure in Greenwich Village earned him little more than anti-hero status with his peers as he returned, got back into step, and eventually graduated.

When I was a student at Hyde and things got tough, we would just grin and bear it. Under adverse conditions, it was the order of the day to grit our teeth and struggle through it. The runaway phenomenon began in 1973. It reached its peak in the late 70s and has now dwindled to an unusual, though not wholly uncommon fact of life. Today's runaway is a completely different bird from that of the 70s. The kids in the 70s would truly run away. A kid might go to Chicago, get a job, get an apartment, live for six months and perhaps return to Hyde later. Many found this to be a valuable experience. In short, the 70s

runaway was an adventurous and independent soul. The runaway in the 90s is symbolic of the antithesis of independence. We have seen credit card runaways. We have seen students go directly to some office of youth services and try to report their parents or even Hyde School for some kind of neglect. While the 70s runaway may have been somewhat self-supporting, his/her 90s counterpart tends to be parasitic, like Blanche Dubois of **Street Car Named Desire**, "*surviving on the kindness of strangers*" (We call them "White Knights"). Thus, the 90s student does not run away. On the contrary, he/she defaults and attempts to negotiate. That negotiation is with the parents. It is a rebellious act against parents, against professed family values.

I think the reason we didn't run away in the 60s and early 70s had something to do with the Vietnam War. As rebellious as those times were, all of us understood that a college deferment was a good thing to have. Thus, "*If I have to go to college I might as well try to go to a decent one*". Once the Vietnam War ended, the need for such deferments ceased and the social climate changed. That is a theory. Here is an observation: In today's teenage youth, we have a population within our society which has perhaps the most sophisticated understanding of its rights of any generation of Americans in history. Most of the students we interview can quote their rights - book, chapter and verse. They know those rights (or think they know them) whether they exist within a family setting, a school setting, or a community setting. At the same time, we are continually seeing this understanding complemented by an incredibly restricted understanding of responsibilities. A teenage individual firmly set in his rights and completely unaware of his responsibilities presents a very volatile combination. When that "balance" is challenged, that volatility is fomented and an explosion occurs. At Hyde School we purposely challenge that volatility because we have come to regard the accompanying explosion as an important first step for genuine personal growth.

WHO RUNS? WHEN AND WHY

Quitting generally occurs early in the game. The rules of the game have changed for these students. They try Hyde for a short while, perhaps speak out against it for a few days, and then leave. Most of them are accustomed to a

set of rules which will change to their liking if they work on their parents long enough. At the admissions interview, we often go through the scenario of a typical Hyde runaway and ask Mom and Dad what they think they will do if this happens. Although less than 10% of Hyde's students will sample the highway in a given year, we feel it's important for families to at least think through the scenario. Funny things happen when the politics of rights clash with the politics of responsibility. The family of the runaway is often surprised. The school is almost never surprised.

Hyde values attitude over aptitude. We subscribe to the notion that nothing can stop the person with the right attitude and that little can help the person with the wrong one. We also constantly stress the point that students, teachers, and parents must be accountable for their own actions. Running away is perhaps a tolerable response **provided that the runner is willing to be accountable for his/her actions.** However, by the very nature of his act the runner is demonstrating an unwillingness to be accountable. After all, he/she has not held him/herself accountable to the commitment that the family made upon enrolling at Hyde. Furthermore, the student has probably not even given the program an honest try to begin with.

At the beginning, expectations at Hyde are simple. We expect each student to go through the "motions" of responsible behavior. We are saying something as simple as this: *"Look Johnny, let's just do the things that responsible people do for awhile and see how much of this rubs off on you."* For one thing, we believe that every serious endeavor has a corresponding set of preparatory calisthenics. For another, we've learned that responsibility does rub off. What do responsible people do? They show up in classes on time with their books. Their lights are out on time. They do their campus jobs satisfactorily. They make their beds. They're prompt. They don't engage in excessive insubordination, etc. The Motions phase is very simple. (For a detailed explanation on Hyde's Motions-to-Effort-to-Excellence continuum see pamphlet entitled Hyde's Building Blocks.) The motions phase is also the one where 99 and 44/100% of those students who run away, run.

HOW TO RESPOND TO THE RUNAWAY

Try to consider your predicament as a part of your education, not as something apart from it. Parents of the runaway are understandably anxious. They want their son or daughter back in the Hyde program. We suggest viewing the whole scenario as part of your child's program rather than an interruption of it. Your child's actions are symptomatic of a family issue which requires addressing. It's doubtful that your child is the problem. The problem is simply being manifested in him or her.

Some alumni and alumni parents have noted that Hyde's main contribution to their lives was that it accelerated a process that was already in motion. Avoid trying to determine the precise incident that precipitated your child's departure. Avoid searching for techniques and methods of manipulating your child. Concentrate on letting go.

During the Motions phase, Hyde allows for little flexibility on its bottom line standards regarding smoking, alcohol and drug usage, tardiness, insubordination, bad attitudes, etc. Thus, the run-away turns to a source where flexibility has been found in the past: home - Mom and/or Dad. Chances are there is historical precedent which warrants this attempt. Our recommendation: A decisive break with this precedent. Your family made a commitment at the conclusion of the interview. Your enrollment is proof of that. We, as a school, made the same commitment to your family. We have pledged that we will work harder than any other school to help you meet with success here. The faculty is not permitted to engage in negative speculation nor cynical predictions on the likelihood of your success at Hyde. Our commitment goes until graduation morning - and beyond. As an example of this, we have essentially eliminated expulsion as a disciplinary tool. Your child needs to be taught that commitments are matters that your family takes seriously.

So much for the theoretical. It is a different story when your son is calling you from a phone booth at some highway truck stop and pleading with you for a chance to return home. What do you do then? Perhaps his exclamations of *"You don't know what it's like here"* or *"It's nothing like they portrayed at the interview"* will reach you in a way that will make you consider wavering on your own

commitment. We, like you, are uneasy at the prospect of having a kid out on the highway in the dark of night, but both of us need to remember three important facts:

- 1) We didn't put him there.
- 2) You didn't put him there.
- 3) He put himself there.

He can get himself back. However, experience has taught us that kind words from you will not do the trick. You will have to close the options that he is asking you to open. Your speech should be abrupt and determined. We suggest you say something like this:

"We made a commitment to this program as a family. We have expectations, the school has expectations, and you have expectations. I can't control how you handle your expectations. I can only control how I handle mine.

I think you should honor your commitment. I hope you do. If you choose not to, I wish you luck in whatever you choose to do with your life. However, I will not support your decision to quit. I love you. Good luck. I don't think we should speak until you decide to return to school."

At that point we recommend that you cut off all communication until he does return to Hyde. Make it clear that the goods, services and amenities generally extended to family members will be withheld until the commitment is honored. This step will be a hard one to take. We would mistrust the heart of any parent who found it easy. Perhaps you will have such difficulty holding this hard line that it will be more effective if you tell your child to communicate directly with the Dean or Headmaster. You may have to refuse to accept the charges of your child's collect calls. You will need support during this time. There are

several families at Hyde who have experienced the runaway phenomenon. We would arrange connections between you and them. They will be more than pleased to return the same support that was extended to them during their own difficult times. Above all, it is essential during this time that you focus on yourself, not on your kid. Remember that **you** made a commitment. Don't gauge the extent that you honor your commitment with the extent that your child honors his or hers. The Family Learning Center can provide a track to run on. Rather than talk with your kid, talk with the FLC. You will also want to talk with the Hyde staff in regard to communicating with legal counsel and law enforcement authorities.

The procedure of re-enrollment will vary according to attitudes and circumstances. In determining appropriate terms for re-admission, the Hyde staff must assess the issues pertinent to the runaway and the dynamics of the family. Expediency must be balanced with the integrity of the Hyde program. Sometimes parents will be tempted to interfere or manipulate the factors concerning re-enrollment. With this in mind, two thoughts merit your consideration:

- 1.) The easier the terms are for the student/family, the greater the risk that the entire scenario will recur.
- 2.) *"We can't control how others react to us; we can only control how we react to them."*

THE LEGITIMACY OF OUR POSITION

The proof of any theory lies in the results which occur after it is put into practice. The results we have witnessed and experienced at Hyde School have convinced us that a hard line is the only way to go. The short term results demonstrate this beyond a shadow of a doubt. When the parents truly "let go" of the runaway and close off the comfortable options, their child will return to Hyde. There is but a handful of students for whom this was not true in the past (and they did learn accountability out in the world and eventually reunited with

their families). However, speaking personally, my evangelical zeal has not evolved from these figures nor from our experiences with the short term. It has evolved from the words that I have heard graduating seniors speak over the years at their respective Commencement exercises. I have heard too many young men and women stand in front of graduation audiences and thank their parents for not quitting on them when they wanted to quit on themselves during their respective moments of truth to doubt our approach. These words have convinced me that we are on the right track and confirm that Hyde is a school for families. Needs have to be distinguished from wants. That is part of the maturing process of adolescence. I have no doubt that if we had given in to the wants of these kids as they were about to run away, we would have ignored their needs and consequently sold them and their families down the river. Instead, we have learned, to paraphrase Goethe, that the roots of personal growth are bitter but the fruit is indeed very sweet.

Malcolm W. Gauld
1991

**Hyde School
616 High Street
Bath, Maine 04530
(207) 443-5584**